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**Syrian Crisis in Jordan: Case Study of Hosting Community Psycho-social in Low Income areas in Amman**

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**Abstract:**

This paper explores the influence that the Syrian crisis has on hosting community psycho-social in low income areas in Amman, Capital of Jordan. Case study was chosen as a design that would support a wider and in-depth exploration because it would be able to address the sensitivity of the issue; based on data from a qualitative study involving ten focus groups conducted from July to October 2017. Available reports and researches have investigated Syrian refugee needs and experiences, while few studies have explored the experiences of Jordanians in a hosting community, especially their psycho-social. In this paper, researcher argues that policy makers and service providers have to pay attention to hosting community experiences; especially their psycho-social. Paper concludes that Jordanians living in low income areas in Amman have been influenced by the Syrian crisis; suffering from frustration and despair, fears, anger, low self-esteem and hopelessness.

**Key words:**

Syrian crisis, low income areas, Jordan, host community, psycho-social, fears, frustrations

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### Introduction

Jordan has been described by some commentators as: *“is bursting with refugees and now hosts the largest number of refugees per capita, of any country on Earth”* (Frelick, 2007: 24). It is important to note that despite all these episodes of forced migration; Jordan is not a signatory to the 1951 UN Refugee Convention and its 1967 protocol, and does not adhere to any legal framework which would govern the rights of refugees (Chatelard, 2002). Furthermore, the Government claimed that *“Jordan does not have a refugee problem; instead, it has an illegal immigration problem”* (Cited in Merrill, 2007:1).

However, the government of Jordan is still very committed to adhering to international laws and customs, especially the principle of *non-refoulement*, which is recognised as an essential principle of customary international law. Since 2011, Jordan has been one of most preferable destinations for forced Syrian migrants who are fleeing war and persecution. According to the recent Housing and Population Census conducted in 2016 by the Jordanian Department of Statistics (DOS), there are nearly 1.4 million Syrian refugees in Jordan, 83% of whom are living in urban settings (DOS, 2016). Of these refugees, 85% are living in off-campus; 23.5% are women, 53% are children and 18% are under five years of age (DOS, 2016).

### Research Rationale and Significance

This research was conducted by the researcher interest to explore influence of the Syrian crisis on Jordanians psycho-social. As the most bulk of research in this field focus on refugees rather than their hosting; while others shed light on the socio-economic implications of the crisis in Jordan (Al-Wazani, 2013; Mercy Corps International, 2013; Al-Wazani, 2014; United Nations Development Programme, 2014). The Economic and Social Council in Jordan has studied and published many reports regarding the impact of the refugee crisis on the labour market; Al-Wazain’s (2014) study of the *“Socio-Economic Implications of Syrian Refugees on Jordan”* provides a comprehensive perspective to understand the situation in Jordan.

Harvard Field Study Group (2014: 1) describes the crisis as; *“one of the greatest humanitarian challenges the international community has faced in recent years”*. UNHCR (2015) reinforces that this crisis is the world’s single largest refugee crisis for almost a quarter of a century under its mandate (UNHCR, 2015).

Despite the heavy pressure the Syrian crisis has hosting communities; yet, no research has explored the psycho-social influence. Therefore, this paper aims to

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explore this influence, especially in low income areas in Amman. According to the UNHCR latest report (2019), 74.8% of the Syrian refugees in Jordan have settled in three main governorates: Amman hosts 29.4%, 24.4% of Syrians in Al-Mafraq and 21% in Irbid. In Amman—the capital city of Jordan—there are about 435.000 refugees, of those only 197.000 are registered with UNHCR (UNHCR, 2019).

Clearly, it can be argued that the continuing political debates regarding the crisis, its implications on the Jordanian community, and the pressure the presence of refugees continues to place on members of the Jordanian community attest to the significance of this study.

### Background to the Host Country

In order to explore the psycho-social influence of Syrian crisis in low income areas in Amman, it is important first to shed light on the context of the host country. An understanding of Jordanian social, economic, and political circumstances is important to determine how they may influence hosting community experiences. Hence the following section focuses on aspects of Jordan's demographic and socio-economic position.

Jordan is a small country situated in the centre of the Arab World with an area of 89.000 square kilometers (DOS, 2018). The current population of **Jordan is 10,138,197** as of Sunday, November 10, 2019, based on World meters elaboration of the latest United Nations data. Jordan ranks number **89** in the list of countries (and dependencies) by population. With **90.9 %** of the population is **urban** (9,183,930 people in 2019). Jordan is seen as one of the most water-poor countries in the world; it has one of the lowest levels of water availability per capita. With the Syrian crisis adding a dramatic population increase, meeting water demand has become even more critical (USAID, 2019). A large part of the country is desert; 60% of population and economic activities are concentrated in an area no greater than 17% of the total; mainly in Amman (the capital), Zarqa, Irbid in the north, and Alkarak in the south (DOS, 2018).

The country is considered as a lower-middle income country with limited natural resources; it has long depended on external assistance. In the light of scarcity of resources, the government relies on its neighbors such as Iraq and Saudi Arabia, for the majority of its energy supply which is delivered at lower cost (World Bank, 2018). The country also faces social and economic problems, most significantly, poverty and unemployment; poverty is likely to have risen in Jordan given rising inflation, unemployment and sluggish growth; with 15.7% from its population living below the poverty line. Unemployment rate remained elevated at 18.5% in the fourth quarter of 2017 (World Bank, 2018-2019).

Amman, the capital city is divided into two parts; Eastern Amman - considered as a low income areas, and Western Amman where people from middle and wealth class are concentrated. Khalifa and Krysiak (2019:1) labeled the situation in Amman as 'the Amman Gap'; in this regard, they wrote:

*"In East Amman you can touch and feel almost everything. Poverty and misery, people on the street, children playing football. Here everything affects you, especially a smell. You can change a car, you can dress differently. In fact, contrarily to its Western neighborhood, East Amman suffers noticeably from the facilities. Living in the West of Amman is a privilege. You have an infrastructure, good water service, private schools and well equipped (and very expensive) medical centers. You have a safe food from the supermarkets and huge malls with the luxury shops where one suit costs more than two month salary in the East of the city. Eastern Amman has the cheap food markets (El Souk El Sha'by), roads full of potholes, free but insufficient school and medical services".*

For the purpose of this paper, Jordanians in low income areas will be the case understudy in order to explore the influence of Syrian crisis on their psycho-social.

#### **Syrian Crisis in Jordan: Socio-Economic Perspective**

Several studies have been conducted on Syrian refugees in Jordan to examine their experiences and their impact on the country's socio-economic situation. Of these, a study conducted by the Economic and Social Council in Jordan (Al-Anani, 2011–2013) concludes that Syrian refugees have exerted great pressure on many sectors of Jordanian society, including education where 14,000 Syrian students are enrolled in Jordanian public schools. In addition, the cost of providing health services for Syrians reached JD 15.924.000 in 2012. It is important to note that over the past five years the Syrian refugee crisis has greatly increased the demands placed on the government of Jordan. The government has raised prices on goods and services and has increased the taxes that Jordanians have to pay. This has led Al-Wazani to describe 2013 as a year that was *"far from ideal for the natural economy.....it witnessed the largest increase in the prices and taxes....."* (2014: 25).

Fakih and Marrouch (2015) stated that the government spent a total cost of \$81.4 million in enrolling 78,531 Syrian children in public schools.

Contrary to the approaches outlined above, it is useful to keep in mind the argument of Dettmer et al. (2015) concerning refugees. They note that the influence of refugees mainly depends on how the hosting communities perceive their presence in relation to the economic situation. As has been documented, Germany benefits from Syrian refugees as active agents; seen as contributors to their host community's economic capacity (Nie, 2015). However, this might not

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be the situation in Jordan where there is evidence that the country already suffers from economic difficulties despite their investments in Jordan (Al-Wazani, 2014). According to Jordan Investment Commission (2019), Syrians investments declined from JD144.2 million in 2013 to JD13.1 million in 2018.

According to IRC (2013), high unemployment in Jordan can be considered to be a major problem the government has faced, but it is not necessarily attributed to the presence of Syrian refugees. Stave and Hillesund (2015) found that outside the refugee camps in Amman, Irbid and Al-Mafraq, more than 40% of the work in the construction industry, 23% work in the wholesale and retail trade and the repair industry, 12% work in manufacturing and 8% in the accommodation and food service industry is carried out by Syrians.

### **Psycho-Social Theory**

It can be argued that *“difficult life circumstances often lead to demoralization and hopelessness, and may be related to profound and persistent existential concerns of safety, trust, coherence of identity, social role and society”* (UNHCR, 2015:14)

From this point of view and in light of the research aim, this section will spotlight on how and why people may develop psycho-social problems, and how the Syrian crisis may influence the hosting community. Psycho-social theory highlights on the ways that individuals are shaped by and react to their social environment; it may provide an explanation of how individuals perceive themselves, how do they react to the world and people around them, and what skills they develop in life.

Psycho-social disorder can be seen as mental illness caused or influenced by life experiences, as well as maladjusted cognitive and behavioral processes (Warfa, 2006). According to Erikson's theory, individuals' sense of self grows develops as they come into contact with a number of social crises throughout their life, each of which forces the individual to react and adapt. Erikson has as a starting point that at each stage in life the individual is confronted with certain challenges, and developmental conflicts arise; conflicts that have both the possibility for growth and development, as well as the vulnerability of being hindered in one's development. Erikson disputes that the conflicts in these transitions between stages occur because there is both a change and development of the drives and the physical body, and the demands to the individual from the surroundings are changing over time. These developmental stages are seen as conflict situations carrying the possibility of both a positive and a negative outcome.

Additionally, Hollis writings about psycho-social may be useful in understanding the situation/experiences of hosting community and the socio-economic implications the Syrian crisis has. *Hollis has been a central representative for the development of psycho-social work in which psychodynamic theory is integrated. She has also included system theory; utilize system theory to understand the individual's relationship to their environment and outer "press", while using psychodynamic theory to understand "stress" within the individual.* The main focus however, is on the stress within a person. Moreover, Hollis and Woods (1981) use system theory to analyze the outside world and to understand "pressure/ outer press". In this regard, they argue that a person is influenced by "pressure" from the environment and "stress" from conflicts within themselves. Hollis and Woods (1981) viewed defense mechanisms as vital in understanding the interaction with the environment; they provided an explanation about the reasons for problematic living situation (Hutchinson and Oltedal, 2014: 41) as follow:

- *A weak ego or superego which influences how independently a person acts, how strong their character is and if one can delay needs,*
- *Fixation in earlier stages – needs not being dealt with acceptably, so that the person is impaired in further development,*
- *Pressure from the environment, bad economy, and bad living conditions.*

*Outside pressure* can be changed through material support (economy, housing, practical help) or the client can be supported in undertaking these changes themselves. *Inner stress* can be worked with by changing the balance of the conflicting forces within the client.

Therefore, Individual may develop sort of psycho-social issues including; family problems, depression, anxiety, substance abuse, sexual abuse, and violence. To conclude, it can be said that from Hollis and Erikson points of view, researcher can argue that Jordanians in low income areas may be influenced by the presence of Syrians on their territory; by understanding of the outside pressure and inner stress factors. In other words, researcher argues that the socio-economic situation in low income areas in Amman may influence hosting community and may be responsible for developing conflicts; which have both the possibility for growth and development, as well as the vulnerability of being hindered in one's development.

### **Refugees and their Hosting Community**

Few studies have investigated the influence of refugees on their hosting psycho-social; research has revealed that conflicts exist between refugees and their hosting. In their research on refugees in the Dadaab refugee camp in Kenya, Kirui and MWaruvie (2012) conclude that the Kenyan Somalis feel that refugees garner more attention than they do because of the international assistance they receive. Refugees have been perceived as enemies by their hosting community;

they are taking milk and honey while the host population starves in their mother land (Kirui and MWaruvie, 2012), others describe them as “bread stealers” (Kibreab, 1996). Alix-Garacia and Saah (2008) argue that the large influx of refugees from Burundi and Rwanda from 1993 to 1994 had a great impact on Tanzania, when a large increase in the price of non-aid food items coincided with the arrival of the refugees. Al-Sharmani (2004) cites how refugees have been described as bread stealers in Egypt and argues that refugees in Egypt are responsible for prevalent problems such as crime and unemployment. Goldenziel (2010) notes that Iraqis in Jordan were viewed as threat because they are believed to be responsible for many problems, such as inflation. Evidently, it can be said that hostility from a hosting community is a frequent problem for refugees. This may be due to the fact that often refugees are moving between developing countries. In 1995, Malkki (1995: 503) described refugees as a “*Third World problem*”. Today, Malkki’s words are still reflected in UNHCR reports which reveal that 80% of the world’s refugees are located in Third World (UNHCR, 2010).

### Methods

A review of literature reveals that there is a tendency to adopt/deploy qualitative research methods in studying refugees and policies. It is argued that qualitative methods enable the researcher to collect great deal of information which facilitates in-depth investigation to the case under study (Bryman, 2012). In providing a justification for adopting qualitative methods, Bryman (2008: 53) argues that: “qualitative researches *study things in their natural settings, attempting to make sense of or to interpret phenomena in the terms of the meanings people bring to them*”. A single case study was chosen as a design that would support a wider, in-depth analysis, and an understanding of psycho-social influence the Syrian crisis has on hosting community. In justifying the use of the case study, Yin (2009) argues that there is a tendency to associate case studies with qualitative research; the *single cases* are used to confirm or challenge a theory, or to represent a unique or extreme case (Bryman, 2012). As qualitative methods, case studies are more appropriate and effective in studying fields that were previously inaccessible and which require careful investigation to avoid misrepresentation and to maximize the investigator's access to the evidence (Bryman, 2012; Yin, 2009).

Focus group discussions were selected for this research promoting participants’ to generate data in a natural environment (Miller and Brewer, 2003). A total of 60 adult Jordanians were selected to participate in the research; 10 focus group discussions were conducted. Each group consisted of 6 participants. Recognising that undertaking a research in a mixed gender group is less favourable in low income areas, due to cultural traditions, the researcher divided the participants

into two groups; five all-male focus groups and five all-female. A convenience sample (Abualoush, et al., 2018; Al-dalahmeh, et al., 2018; Bryman, 2012) was used in order to include people who were easy to reach and interested in participating in the research. Only those who agreed to participate in the study and where interested in doing so, were included. Fieldwork was conducted from July to October 2017 at different locations, depending on their presence. All 10 of the focus group discussions were unstructured and used a topic guide to cover all the themes identified in the research objective. The participants were asked about their own perceptions and beliefs about the presence of Syrians and how this has influenced their psycho-social. Before each discussion, participants were informed of the purpose of the research; they were asked for permission to record the sessions. Discussions completed and transcribed the transcripts in Arabic, which were subsequently translated into English.

The analysis process consisted of generating composite lists of all the different problems mentioned by participants and the number of different participants who mentioned each problem. In order to maintain confidentiality, synonyms were used instead of participant's names. Limited by the four month duration of investigation and the large number of discussions, this paper addresses the most sensitive and most common themes. It draws on the words of the participants in order to present a thorough description of their experiences.

### **Results**

Discussions with participants reveal that their psycho-social has been influenced by the Syrian crisis. Unemployment and poverty -which participants in low income areas are suffering from- are fundamental problems which profoundly affect their psycho-social situation and may lead to stress and low self-esteem. Participants are suffering sorrow, despair, frustration, humiliation, loneliness, lack of security and other negative feelings. Participants reported suffering from a variety of problems:

#### **Frustration**

Frustration was emerged as prevalent theme during discussions; feeling of loss, future ambiguity and not secure in their territory are factors which considerably contribute to participants' feelings of frustration and ineffectiveness.

*"I do not have work, I am looking for anything to do but unfortunately no one accept; they asked for long working hours with low salary, I feel frustrated".*

*Another participant stated: "(I am) frustrated...I am nothing...I am useless...I do not have anything to do in my life...I wish I could enroll on any vocational training for beauty or sewing, but I cannot find anything ... what will happen to me ....."*

Feelings of lack of security were discussed as many participants pointed that the presence of Syrians in their areas posed a threat on their safety *"my husband*



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*was picking olives from the garden, Syrian male and female came to him and asked to give them the harvest, when he rejected, the Syrian female said that she will shout and claim that my husband was sexually abusing her”.*

While others mentioned that the presence of Syrian girls creates ethical problems; as many youths may engage in bad relationships; early marriage (temporary marriage as described from some participants) within Syrian girls posed an acute problem for Jordanians; *“bad living circumstances within Syrians pushed many families to send their daughters to a women called (Um Abdallah) responsible for marriage bargains.....these bargains were temporary”* then he added shamefully: *“do you know what happened next to these girls!!!”.*

Participants presented symptoms of various fears; fear of going out as social problems and crimes were prevalent in their areas, as one participants stated: *“We are afraid of going out or send our children to play outside; many problems such as kidnap and rape occurred in the area, we cannot feel safe anymore”.*

One added: *“I am sure you have heard about what happened to Ahmad; the little 7 years old boy”.* Participant here indicated to a crime occurred in 2017 in Jabal Alnuzha (Eastern Amman) where a 7 years old boy has been raped and killed.

*Other added: “I am afraid of the future ...the situation in the country is getting worse... we do not know what will happen to us .... this makes me nervous and under stress”.*

While others insisted on leaving the country, in the first chance they will find, as the situation in the country become unbearable.

*“I am looking for any chance to leave the country; it does not matter where to go, the only thing is I have to leave”.* Participants’ accounts pinpoint to the bad economic conditions they live; *“we cannot find job, even in informal sector, Syrians are working in many premises, I cannot pay for rent, bills, and other needs”.*

### **Jealousy and Emotional Void**

Discussions with females revealed that they have developed feelings of jealousy and emotional void from the presence of Syrian girls in their areas. They feel jealous and envious of other females’ new clothes and mobile phones as they received funds from organizations working on behalf of Syrian refugees. They explained that some Syrian girls tend to sell their food coupons in order to buy new clothes and go to a beauty salon.

*“Syrian girls have better opportunities than us; they attract Jordanian men’s*

eyes”

*Another participant shouted: “we do not have the right to live securely as these Syrians wandering in our land; I have the right to work, study and marry, but they stole our opportunities”.*

The presence of Syrian girls resulted in many Jordanians females feeling lonely and a sense of emotional void as previously mentioned in relation to marriage bargains which in turn reduce Jordanians female opportunities in marriage.

### **Low Self-esteem**

Low self-esteem was a common theme in discussions and participants, especially more highly qualified ones who were unemployed or working in jobs not appropriate to their experience; developed a sense of uselessness. Other participants felt degraded when asking for help and relief.

*“I feel low self-esteem....I am graduated from university and washing cars in streets!!!; I cannot find respectful job; I am getting wet from this work and developing many diseases, it is very cold at winter; but what shall I do?”*

Participants explained that the Syrian crisis increased their sufferings, as one participant stated: *“we could not say that Syrians are responsible for all our problems; we already suffer, but with Syrians the situation became worse and worse, and new problems emerged”*. Others pinpointed to the fact that Syrians are sharing with them many services such as in health sector; *“when I went to the medical centre asked for vaccinations, they replied that they were running out....many Syrians came in the early morning”*. Then added: *“shall I have to go to private clinic to give my son his vaccination?”*

*“Going to the market is not the same; I remember we used to know everyone, but not anymore; now I feel estranged. All I see around are unfamiliar faces; the shops are full of Syrians”*

*“Syrians came to my country, shared my land, my food, and caused prices to rise”*  
*“Jordanian men marry from Syria with very low cost....no dowry, no wedding party, no separate home is needed...instead, she will stay with you in family house and provide care for your parents”*

### **Discussion and Conclusion**

The large population of Syrian refugees in Jordan is increasingly affecting everyday life throughout the country. Jordan now has more than 1.4 million Syrian refugees (DOS, 2016), with more arriving every day. In light of the continuing political situation in Syria, it seems that the Syrian refugee crisis is not likely to disappear in the near future. Therefore, understanding the influence that refugees have on Jordanians in low income areas is essential. This paper

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presents evidence that the large number of refugees settling in Amman low income areas had a negative impact on the psycho-social of the local community. Therefore, while there is a great concern to provide psycho-social treatment programs for Syrian refugees in Jordan, decision makers and service providers should also face the significant challenge of addressing psycho-social conditions among the hosting community. Not only are Syrian refugees in need for assistance and intervention, but so too are their hosting community.

This paper shines a spotlight on the experiences of people in host communities, a population that is not often studied. It is based on the stories shared during focus group discussion involving 60 Jordanians and their expressions of the experiences that have shaped their daily lives since the arrival of Syrian refugees in 2011. By identifying the anger, sorrow, frustration and hatred felt by Jordanians living in low income areas in Amman, this paper highlights the complex and multi-layered nature of the hosting population's experience. The researcher recommends further research in this area in order to effectively inform the policies of hosting governments, international agencies and NGOs supporting and protecting refugees in Jordan in order for them to also consider the needs and experiences of the people in the hosting communities.

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